

Music and shared imaginaries: nationalisms, communities, and choral singing

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VOICE, BODY, PEOPLE: POLYPHONIC SINGING IN HISPANIC-URUGUAYAN MUSIC¹⁶⁹

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Abstract: *Murga* is a carnival ensemble of Hispanic origin, a popular theater genre characterized historically by male polyphony that started developing during the 19th century in Uruguay towards a deepening of the theatrical aspects. The polyphonic choral singing is characteristic of these groups, which syncretize aspects of the *chirigotas* and *murgas* of the carnivals in Cadiz, Extremadura, and Castilla with elements of Venetian Carnival and Afro-Uruguayan music.

Murga is characterized by the traditional use of *contrafactum* from popular songs. The main function of these carnivalesque groups is satire and criticism of current events, particularly national events. The texts also have a self-referential aspect, marking that they belong to the people. Within the dramatic development the choir, in its dialogue with the soloists, represents an idealized people.

Keywords: popular polyphony, popular theatre, carnival, Hispanic-Uruguayan *murga*.

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Uruguayan *murga* as a popular choral expression

This work focuses on the popular character of the Hispanic-Uruguayan *murga*, a carnivalesque expression that has been developed in Uruguay since the late 19th century from Spaniard models, with the special presence of elements of the *murgas* and *chirigotas* of Andalusia, Extremadura, and Castile. Upon these aspects were incorporated elements of the Venetian carnival, consecutive influences of Cuban and Brazilian expressions, and of Afro-Uruguayan music, *candombe*, a genre also present in Carnival.

The research has been developing for over two decades; among its results it is worth mentioning being the first to establish in the literature the existence of *murgas* beyond Montevideo, the country's capital (Fornaro 1999); the types of relationship with the Spaniard groups (Fornaro 1999, 2002); the link between repertoire and identity processes (Fornaro and Díaz 2001); the processes of repertoire creation (Fornaro 2008); and the relationship between *murga* and media culture (Fornaro 2013). Prior to and during the period of this research, other approaches on this event have produced literature, which can be divided into two main aspects: one could be considered "emic literature" produced by members of *murga* groups (Diverso 1989; Lamolle and Lombardo 1998); and the other, analysis from literary studies, cultural studies, sociology (Remedi 1996; Sans 2008, among others).

In accordance with the call of this Conference, after characterizing the *murga*, this paper focuses on the importance of choral aspects and the relationship with the concepts of people and popular belonging that these groups, producers of many self-referential texts, develop steadily in each new repertoire, and on the dynamics of the relationship with their fans and the general public.

In Uruguay, the most important aspect of the local re-elaboration of the genre lies in the deepening of the theatrical aspects, to the point that it can be described as a genre of popular theater that includes several arts: music, recitation, drama, scenography, makeup, costumes, sometimes even dance. The carnivalesque insertion has been clear from the beginning although, in recent decades, *murga* shows started appearing throughout the whole year, with a change of repertoire in each carnival. The possibility of disseminating the repertoires in audio and multimedia formats, specially since the genre accessed the CD, the DVD and the web, influenced this new presence of the genre, more permanent, not only limited to the carnival period of the annual cycle.

From the musical point of view, historically *murgas* are formed by male artists and characterized by the polyphonic choral singing with the accompaniment of three instruments (bass drum, cymbals, and snare drum); in recent decades the guitar was added. From the literary point of view, the most traditional aspect is the use of *contrafactum* from popular songs on each annual cycle or those that have remained popular

through the years. The main function of these carnival groups is of satire and criticism towards current events, especially local.

The *murga* repertoire includes spoken parts –some expressions close to everyday speech and others based on popular reciting techniques; fragments that can be considered drama performances; and sung parts. Among the spoken parts monologues are frequent and, even more, dialogues between characters, especially between soloists and chorus characters. As for the music, there is a predominance of an elaborate vocal polyphony, consisting of a register of *primos*, *sobreprimos*, *tercia*, *segundos*, and *bajos*. The character of the *murga* singing has been analyzed with a technical point of view, from an emic perspective, by Lamolle and Lombardo (1998, 43); and from a musicological analysis by Carlos Correa de Paiva (2013, *passim*). This paper addresses the issues prioritized by the Conference, i.e. the link between *murga* singing, the national and carnival imaginaries in which it's embedded and simultaneously contributes to, and the developing of the *topoi* that establishes an equivalence between people and *murga*. As a brief characterization of the technical aspects of polyphony, let us note that the relationship between voices has varied throughout the 20th century until today – an aspect that can be observed through historical records and listening to contemporary ensembles– from a predominance of voices moving in third intervals towards a greater variety, which includes consecutive fifths and fourth intervals. As in other aspects of this expression, a professionalization in the arrangements can be appreciated, since the traditional practice of polyphony has been accompanied by the figure of the arranger, who in many cases possesses knowledge of an academic nature.

***Murga* repertoire**

The *murga* performance is a kind of civil, urban ritual, with established rules both institutional (rules approved by the cities' authorities that organize official competitions) and from the popular practice. The *murga* repertoire is the heritage, regarding both parts and nomenclature, of the *murgas* and *chirigotas* from different regions of Spain. Unlike the Spanish groups, that change names every carnival, Uruguayan *murgas* are identified with a name –often referring to popular expressions, even with *lunfardo*¹⁷¹ words. Following approximately the Cadiz model, the Uruguayan *murga* divides its act in three essential parts: *presentación* or *saludo* (introduction or greeting); *cuplé* (couplet) –often accompanied by a *popurrí* (potpourri); and the *despedida* or *retirada* (farewell or withdrawal). These terms are part of the daily language of Uru-

¹⁷¹ *Lunfardo*: River Plate slang, with an important presence in tango.

guayan popular classes; their fixed order is the structuring axis of the stage representation, with different importance depending on the moment. Thus, *retiradas* are the part of the repertoire that is more remembered beyond the Carnival –some even for more than half a century– but the *cuplés* are essential at the time of the performance and in institutional contests.¹⁷²

The *presentación* introduces the group. The fundamental topic is the return of the carnival, the cyclical nature of the festivity. Very often this part begins with a recited fragment, a modern substitute of the figure of the host that *murgas* had in the early 20th century. The presentation also includes a *clarinada* (clarion call); a fragment sung *a capella* where often the polyphonic arrangements stand out. It would be intended to draw public attention at the beginning of the performance –an audience that awaits, a little scattered, at the popular carnival scenarios.

The *popurrí*, *salpicón*, or *pericón* comprehends a tour of the current issues, discussed quickly, usually in quatrains structure that can be consonantized in the pair verses, intercalated by a chorus. Gradually, in many *murgas* this part has been integrated to the *saludo* or, preferably, the *cuplé*. The *popurrí* includes mainly criticism and satire.

The *cuplé* is the nuclear part of the repertoire, and the time of maximum dramatization by one or several prominent characters, the *cupleteros*. There could be a single *cuplé* or it could be distributed, changing the subject, in several couplets. The *cupletero* represents a character whose features often constitute in itself a criticism: the consumer, the traditional politician... Often the introduction of a character distant from reality –an alien, a time traveler, a gaucho¹⁷³ or peasant arriving to the capital– starts a dialogue with the choir, that then has the excuse to explain and criticize what happened throughout the year. The characters that represent the topic and the name of the *cuplés* may represent local or international stereotypes; virtues or defects; known characters, both real or from movies and television shows; concepts. The latter case shows examples of outstanding preparation. In the *Cuplé de Doña Identidad* (Mrs. Identity) performed by the murga “Contrafarsa” in 1999, the concept of national identity is represented by an elderly lady, who is lost, named “Doña Identidad Nacional de la Patria” (Mrs. National Identity of the Homeland). The text is partly a *contrafactum* of the *candombe* “Doña Soledad” by Alfredo Zitarrosa, one of the most representative creator and performer in Uruguayan popular music of the second half of the 20th century.

¹⁷² The “Concurso Oficial de Agrupaciones Carnavalescas” organized by the authorities of Montevideo (the capital), is the most important and ancient: on the last decades they have taken place in the interior of the country, in various capitals, and in the city of Salto, upon the Uruguay River, the “Festival del Litoral”.

¹⁷³ A former inhabitant of the countryside in the River Plate area.

The *cuplé* criticizes the adoption of foreign cultural elements, especially of American origin, the oversight of the national cultural heritage, and the loss of the triumphant country symbolized by the football victory of 1950 at Maracaná (Brazil), a moment of strong roots in the Uruguayan imaginary, an international brand of a “country of fat cows” that disappeared in the following decades.

*Esta es Doña Identidad/Identidad Nacional
se perdió y no tiene quién/la venga acá a reclamar.
Doña Identidad/ la vieron pasar
por última vez/los viejos del bar
festejando en un tranvía/el triunfo de Maracaná*¹⁷⁴.

This is Mrs. Identity/National Identity
She was lost, and there was no one
To come here and claim her.
Mrs. Identity/They saw her go by
For the last time/The old men from the bar
Celebrating in a tram/The triumph of the Maracaná.

The *retirada* or *despedida* retakes the tone of the presentation, regarding lyricism and thematic elements. It usually develops a core theme, but the cyclical nature of the festivity and the promise of the *murga* coming back for the next carnival are always present. This is the part of the repertoire whose pieces have survived the most in popular memory.

In previous works we have addressed the topics discussed in *murga* (see especially, Fornaro and Díaz 2001; Fornaro 2008): the carnival; the *murga* itself; the relationship between *murgueros* and their group; the “great themes of humanity” (the way *letristas*, or lyricists, define religion, philosophical values, destiny, life and death, the characteristics of humanity as such, ideologies); technology and its changes; fashion; women (with strong misogynistic elements that have been tempered in the last two decades); gender options (with homophobic elements also with a tendency of tempering and even disappearing in the most ideologically committed groups); sports, especially football; the city; the neighborhoods. The “hot topics” include national and international political events, issues upon which criticism and satire unfold with remarkable strength. This thematic inventory has been conformed, from a Hispanic heritage, throughout the 20th century and the current century to date.

¹⁷⁴ Included in *Murga Contrafarsa en vivo!*. 1999. Ayuí A/E 213. CD.

Murga, people, belonging

We noted before that the topics addressed by *murga* are frequently self-referential. This self-reference includes:

- a) The genre belonging to the Carnival, the cyclical nature of this festivity and therefore of the *murga* life, are subjects that, as already noted, are especially developed in the *presentaciones* and *retiradas*. Rafael Bayce classified the *presentaciones* into two types: lyrical and cyclical. The first “highlight the carnival and *murga* ideality and its contribution to social functioning, by reproducing values and providing emotional support” while cyclical presentations emphasize “the come-back in the cycle of eternal return that was hopefully announced in the *despedida* of the previous year and most likely will be repeated in the *retirada* minutes after” (Brecha 27/03/1992). On this thematic, strongly stereotyped comparisons and metaphors are developed, which *murga* groups resort to again and again. Thus, for example, it is common to assimilate *murga* to a sparrow, an urban bird; and to the swallow, for its annual migration cycle. God Momo is also frequently referred to, as well as characters of the *Commedia del' Arte*.
- b) The “*murga*-people link”. Some examples of texts from different decades are presented, where this relationship is established. For example, the *murga* “La Milonga Nacional”, with text by Carlos Modernell, set in 1968 the relationship *murga/people*” “La Milonga Nacional” as a *murga* that meets those conditions –and introduces several *murga topoi*:

*Murga es el imán fraterno
que al pueblo atrae y lo hechiza
murga es la eterna sonrisa
en los labios de un Pierrot,
quijotesca bufonada
que se aplaude con cariño
es la sonrisa de un niño
al que ofrenda su canción.
Murga son las mil esquinas
que atesoran su recuerdo
con un coro que en el cielo
por siempre quiere grabar,
la musa casi sin rima*

*del poeta, que bohemio
tejió en alas de su sueño
romances al Carnaval
murga es pueblo, ingenio, risa
es “Milonga Nacional”.*

Murga is the fraternal magnet
Which attracts and bewitches the people
murga is the eternal smile
on the lips of a Pierrot;
a quixotic joke
that is applauded with love
and in the smile of a child
offers up its song...

Murga are the thousand corners
That treasure its memories
With a choir that in the heavens
they always wants to record,
the almost rhyme-less muse
from the bohemian poet, that
knitted from dreamy wings
romances for Carnival.

Murga is people, inventiveness and laughter
It is “Milonga Nacional”

Texts that show belonging to the working class are recurrent, as in the example of the *retirada* of the *murga* “Ahí va la bocha, señores” of Villa Constitución, Salto Department. This 1987 text was written by Juan José Escobar, and was provided by the author during our field work in the northwest of the country:

*La murga se va, señores,
pero lo hacemos contentos
porque no existe la ausencia
sino un continuo reencuentro.
Porque adónde irá la murga
sino al seno de su pueblo,
a integrarse al cotidiano
menester de los obreros?*

The *murga* is going, gentlemen,
But we are content
Because there is no absence
but continuous new meetings.
Because where will the *murga* go
If not to the heart of the people,
To be part of the daily labour
Of the workers?

Or this text by Jose María “Catusa” Silva for the *murga* “Araca la Cana”, which became almost an anthem during the dictatorship period in Uruguay between 1973 and 1985:

*Araca es la murga compañera
de un pueblo que construye
su senda verdadera...*

Araca is the companion *murga*
from the people who construct
their true path...

- c) Linked to this topic appears the relationship between the *murga* as an entity, that could almost be considered abstract, with the members of each group, who give *murga* a carnal, physical, scenic existence. It should be noted that *murga*, as a group and as carnivalesque expression, is always identified in the discourse with feminine terms. This seemingly contradictory gender attribution is explained in numerous texts through a love relationship, either with murguistas in love with *murga*, as their children, or even both aspects in a single text. Thus, the *murga* /female ambivalence is the core theme of the 2001 Carnival’s *retirada* of the *murga* “Nunca Más” (“Never more”) of the City of Colonia del Sacramento. The text plays with the polysemy referring, in person, to the passion of the *murguero*/man for the *murga* /woman.

*Vibré con lo que expresabas/mi piel toda se erizó
y tu cadencia hecha verso/todos mis nervios crispó.
Y así, loco por tocarte/me entrometí en tu mixtura...
me enloquecí con rozarte/y me metí en tu figura¹⁷⁵.*

¹⁷⁵ Included in the compact disc *De inmigrantes a criollos: Música popular uruguaya de raíz hispánica. Una investigación de Marita Fornaro*. Ediciones Universitarias de Música, Montevideo, 2002.

I vibrated with your expression / my skin got goose bumps
and your cadency made verse / set my nerves on edge.
And so, crazy to touch you / I mixed in your mixture
I was mad to brush against you / and I took your form

People following people: *murgas* and their audience

A related aspect with the *murga*/people link is developed during the gestation of each annual repertoire. Rehearsals are the environment where different aspects of each show are finally captured. These rehearsals take place in local clubs, sporting institutions, headquarters of labor institutions. The followers of each *murga* witness these instances every night, and the relationship with the members of the group is very strong; in some cases the comments of the closest “fans” can even influence changes in some aspect of the show. The *murga* supporters follow the group since November, when they start rehearsing until the end of Carnival –that in Montevideo and some other cities where competitions are made, could last a whole month. In *murgas* with fewer economic resources, *murgas* constituted as cooperatives, these followers are in charge of collecting resources, accompanying the group to the contest instances, if any, and they are similar to what constitutes a sports fan. In the case of cooperative *murga* “Nunca Más”¹⁷⁶ of the City of Colonia del Sacramento (whose activity we followed throughout an annual cycle), friends and family had formed a group that they informally called “La Siempre Sí” (Always Yes), referring to their loyalty to the modest group which suffered a hard marginalization in the dominant official contest at the capital.

A representative testimony of this kind of popular echo, intensified by the period lived –the last year of the dictatorship that took place between 1973 and 1985–belongs to Raúl Castro, responsible and lyricist for the *murga* “Falta y Resto”, referring to the *presentación* rehearsal based on a *contrafactum* of *La hierba de los caminos*, a song of the Spanish Revolution¹⁷⁷:

This *presentación* was premiered in a final rehearsal that was done in La Teja’s¹⁷⁸ “La cachimba del piojo”, a modest athletic court, and there was a wiring; behind the wiring there were people. We were singing on the court, in plain clothes. It was the year 1984. We started

¹⁷⁶ “Never More”: The name of this group clearly refers to its ideology regarding the violation of human rights during the dictatorship period.

¹⁷⁷ Interviewed by Marita Fornaro in September 2011.

¹⁷⁸ Working class neighborhood in the City of Montevideo.

singing: “La hierba de los caminos”... And people began to come closer to the wiring and started knocking it down. And suddenly they had knocked down all the wiring and they were all standing, all around us, the whole neighborhood listening! This moves me until today, because it was like we had arrived... probably ten o’clock at night, one night in January, still under the shadow of dictatorship... at an industrial neighborhood such as La Teja, that had the soap factory occupied, the refinery, the oil factory closed, the glass factory... so many people on the streets; and the guys heard singing about what happened to them.

We will be closing this work with that image: the residents of a humble neighborhood in Montevideo, at the end of a particularly difficult period, next to a broken wiring, and surrounding a group of popular artists whom they recognize with a strong sense of belonging, and listening to their voices:

*¿Qué culpa tiene el murguista
que es el eco de la gente
que las voces se agiganten
se multipliquen y pasen
de manantial a torrente?*

Why blame the *murguista*,
who’s the echo of the people,
for the engorgement of the voices
that multiplied, and transformed
from a spring into a torrent?

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